Reviewer's report

Title: Snap shots of gender and health systems: What does photography reveal about close to community providers?

Version: 1 Date: 1 February 2015

Reviewer: Pauline Oosterhoff

Reviewer's report:

This is an interesting topic, certainly for this readership and the paper is written in a clear and accessible language. The authors discuss the gendered images of community systems and close-to-community providers submitted to a photography competition. This is relevant – amongst others- because of the feminisation of public health and the increasing number of competitions held in public health settings to generate ideas and products.

Major Compulsory Revisions

However the article overall lacks a critical analysis. The study discusses a rather small sample: 63 pictures from 15 countries. This is remarkable because the authors write that the RinGs photography competition was advertised widely on social media and among the health systems research consortia involved in RinGs. Why is that? It would be useful to know more details of this competition. How was the competition organised? Benefits? What did the text of the invitation say? Did people receive financial benefits and at what moment? What were the discussions on benefits prior to the competition? “Social media” is much too vague; which social media exactly and in what languages? The purpose and the benefits of a competition affects who is likely to participate.

I would also have liked a bit more of a critical analysis of “competitions” and “participation” within a broader context of neo-liberal budget cuts. Questions can be raised about asking people to give their ideas and work for free. One can see this as a form of participation but one might also see this as unpaid work or something that creates false incentives. What happened with the pictures? The authors say they reflect on the narrative and politics underlying the images which is correct and can be explored further. The way a competition is organized affects the photographers choices in what they choose to highlight and how they frame their images? Why did the winning picture win? The description of the picture suggests there is an agenda for a “good picture”.
“The winning photo is a professional portrait of an older woman who used to be a traditional birth attendant, who has retrained as a professional midwife in Uganda. The image resounds with the strength, dignity and confidence of a woman proud of her contributions despite the challenges faced.”

What does that tell us about human resources for health as a field? Where do the authors position themselves?

I also would have liked to see a bit more discussion on participatory methodologies in health system. There are manuals on participatory methods in the health field such as PAR Methods Readers2014.’Note the list in section 2.3. http://www.equinetafrica.org/bibl/docs/PAR%20Methods%20Reader2014%20for%20web.pdf. Where does this project fit in?

Minor Essential Revisions

The authors acknowledge that pictures do not simply mirror reality, but do not engage with the theoretical literature on the topic of representation, which makes this a rather descriptive piece. There is a wealth of research in ethnographic film starting with “through Navajo eyes” in the early sixties. Where do the authors position themselves in terms of these debates on the right to visual representation?

It is a pity that the authors did not contact the photographers to try to examine whether what the authors thinks a photo aims to say matches with what the photographer had in mind. It would at be useful to see a table with who the photographers are, their gender and where they are from.

In terms of gender analysis it might be that there were very few submissions documenting the role of men as health providers, managers or politicians engaging in gender issues as a way of transforming health systems. But this might also be because women don’t feel comfortable picturing men –certainly not if these are their bosses- and asking for their pictures.

**Level of interest:** An article of importance in its field

**Quality of written English:** Needs some language corrections before being published

**Declaration of competing interests:**

'I declare that I have no competing interests'